

West Hartford Center

Central Business District

Planning Initiative



Prepared for:

The Town of West Hartford Town Council

Prepared by:

Town of West Hartford Planning Division

Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

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- **Alanna Heaney** - Neighborhood Resident
- **Lisa Campo** - Neighborhood Resident
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- **Anna Falk** - Neighborhood Resident
- **Scott Falk** - Neighborhood Resident
- **Christine Fichera** - Neighborhood Resident
- **David Meehan** - Neighborhood Resident
- **Robert Milburn** - Neighborhood Resident
- **Kevin Prestage** - Town Plan and Zoning Commission Liaison and Neighborhood Resident
- **Robert Udolf** – West Hartford Center Commercial Property Owner

Town of West Hartford Staff

- **Mark McGovern** – Director of Community Development
- **Todd Dumais** – Town Planner
- **Catherine Dorau**- Associate Planner
- **Brittany Bermingham** – Planning Technician

Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc

- **Francisco Gomes** - Project Manager
- **Kenneth Livingston** –Public Outreach & Engagement Facilitator
- **Rory Fitzgerald** – Public Outreach & Engagement Facilitator

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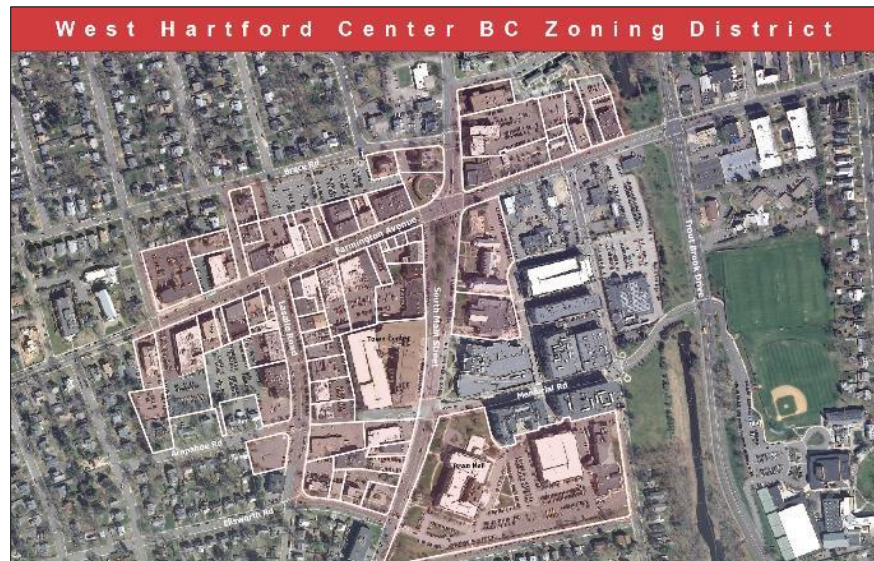
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I. INTRODUCTION

The genesis of this planning initiative was a direct outgrowth of two unsuccessful proposed zoning ordinance amendments in the spring and fall of 2016. The first amendment was a Town sponsored proposal to change to several zoning metrics impacting density within the BC district, notably building height and floor area ratio (F.A.R.). During the public hearing, the proposal received significant concern and broad opposition from neighborhood and town residents. Acknowledging this, the Town withdrew the amendment and the Town Council stated that it would work more closely with the neighborhood prior to advancing any future similar changes. Subsequently, and prior to the Town performing any additional neighborhood engagement, in October of 2016, a property owner in the Center advanced a similar, but less extensive, proposal to change zoning metrics impacting density within the BC district. Again, the proposal generated significant concern and broad opposition from neighborhood and town residents and was, in a unanimous vote, denied by the Town Council.

After that vote, the Town Council adopted a resolution concerning the Central Business (BC) zoning district, in West Hartford Center (Center). The resolution directed town staff to engage the neighborhood surrounding the BC zone in the Center and create a public forum on the planning and zoning process and the applicability of planning and zoning principles affecting the BC zone.



Working under this direction, town staff reached out to the neighborhood and received interest from ten individuals that volunteered to serve on a Working Group to examine planning issues related to the Center. The group was established and comprised of town residents, predominantly residents from the immediate neighborhood west of the Center but also included residents from the neighborhood north of the Center; an owner of commercial property within the Center; and a liaison from the Town Plan and Zoning Commission, all of whom are passionate about preserving and enhancing the Center to ensure it continues to function as a great place.

In addition to establishing the Working Group, town staff was authorized by the Town Council, to hire a planning consultant firm to assist and facilitate with the neighborhood and community outreach. The firm Fitzgerald & Halliday Inc. (FHI) of Hartford was selected because of their particular expertise and reputation in management of similar robust public engagement planning initiatives.

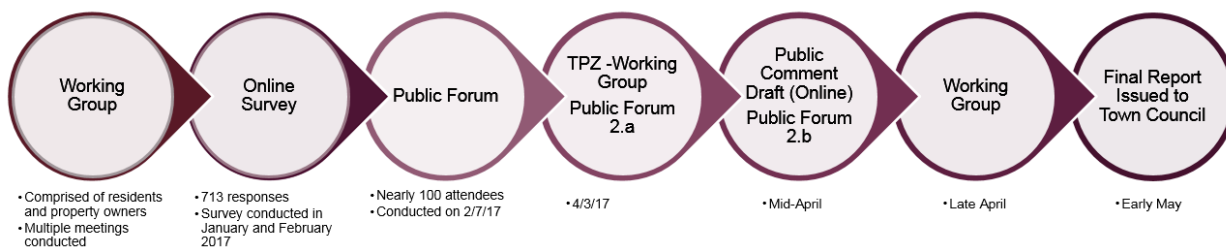
Over the past six months, the Working Group, with the assistance of FHI, completed an in-depth review of West Hartford Center to form a vision statement and set guiding principles. The role of the group was not to support or oppose any specific project, but rather to develop a consensus vision and set of guiding principles intended to ensure that the Center remains a great place for residents, visitors, and business investment while fostering a strong sense of community. It is important to note, that while the group did review zoning regulations within the BC zone, particularly those related to density, the public engagement process revealed a broader series of quality of life issues that ultimately became the focus of this planning review.

The intent of this document is to summarize the efforts of the Working Group, highlight the public engagement process and provide context for the vision statement and guiding principles. It is the hope of the Working Group that this initiative can support and inform future decisions regarding changes to the character, economic development, traffic and parking, and open space within the Center.

II. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS & SUMMARY

Utilizing the experience, expertise and guidance of FHI, the Working Group designed a comprehensive and robust public engagement process for West Hartford Center. The goal of this process was to survey key stakeholders and residents regarding their thoughts and concerns about properties in the BC zoning district and to establish a vision for how the Center should evolve over time. An important focus of this effort was the relationship of the Center to adjacent residential neighborhoods.

The public engagement process used a number of methods for engaging key stakeholders and the public. The elements of this process included:



WORKING GROUP

The Working Group was organized by the Town Planning and Zoning division that included neighborhood residents, a commercial property owner, and a liaison from the Town Planning and Zoning

Commission. The group assembled and met six times over the course of the planning initiative. A broad range of topics were discussed ranging from planning and zoning concepts and terminology, including the Plan of Conservation and Development (P.O.C.D.) and zoning ordinances, to a review of current zoning metrics within the BC zone to a review of comparable town centers in the state to a specific discussion of concerns about the Center and identification of the next steps necessary to address those concerns. Through this process, the Working Group advocated for the meaningful public engagement process and subsequently and actively assisted in those efforts.



ONLINE SURVEY

An online survey was composed as a means of soliciting feedback regarding how people use the Center, what their preferences and concerns are, and thoughts they have about potential future uses or changes in the Center. The survey, which was released prior to the public forum, was also used as a mechanism to promote the forum.

The survey was conducted in January and February of 2017 and was promoted via the Town's website, social media, and direct mailings to households in West Hartford. A total of 713 survey responses were received. The key findings are summarized below. A copy of the complete survey results is included in Appendices.

About the respondents

- 60% of survey respondents live in West Hartford, but beyond a five minute walk of the Center; 32% of respondents live in, or within, a five minute walk of the Center.
- 65% of respondents have lived, worked, or owned property in West Hartford for more than 10 years

How respondents use the Center

- When asked what they use the Center for, 88% of respondents replied that they use the Center for food and dining, 67% use it for shopping, 54% use the Center to access Town Hall or the Library and 50% use the center to go out for drinks or entertainment.
- 78% of respondents use the Center on the weekends versus 61% on the weekdays; 60% of respondents use the Center in the evening versus 50% on weekdays.
- 58% of respondents typically arrive by car and park in a parking lot; 46% arrive by car and park on-street; 35% arrive by car and park in a garage; 47% walk or bicycle to the Center

What respondents think about the Center

- The top responses for what respondents like about the Center were as follows: 80% like that it is pedestrian friendly; 80% like the mix of restaurants; 77% like that it feels safe; 62% like the shops and services; 57% like the trees, benches and open space; 54% like seeing people in the Center.

"I chose to move to West Hartford when I came back to CT after 10 years because of the Center, it has a European feel unique in CT. I have found it sad to see a lot of the shops having left or in the process of leaving. The restaurants are nice but it is good to have a mix of shops to attend to daily necessities rather than having to go to the mall for everything"

- Asked what the Center needs more of, 57% replied retail shops; 46% replied functional open space; 29% replied specialty shops (such as coffee, ice cream, candy etc.)

"Goldilocks density: dense enough to support vibrant main streets with retail and services for local needs, but not too high that people can't take the stairs in a pinch. Dense enough to support bike and transit infrastructure, but not so dense to need subways and huge underground parking garages. Dense enough to build a sense of community, but not so dense as to have everyone slip into anonymity."

- When asked what concerns respondents have about the center, 36% of respondents said a lack of available parking; 27% identified traffic congestion; 22% identified traffic safety as a concern; 21% replied that they don't have any concerns.

"I do not want the density to go up. Starting to become more of a city than a town. Becoming less family friendly as stores for shopping for kids have left (shoes, clothes, stationary) and replaced with restaurants and salons. Forcing us to the mall more and more. Don't want height of buildings to go up."

- When asked to select one statement that best represents their thoughts about the Center, 47% of respondents selected "the Center should continue to grow and change but incrementally"; 16% of respondents selected "the Center should be open for significant growth and change"; 15% selected "I like the Center now and prefer to keep it as it is"; 8% selected "I preferred the Center as it was fifteen years ago"; and 14% chose to write in other responses.

PUBLIC FORUM

A public forum was conducted at Town Hall on 2/7/17. Two evening sessions were conducted with approximately 100 attendees. The goal of the forum was to provide information to participants regarding the Center's BC zoning district and general retail and development trends that town centers are experiencing and most importantly, solicit public feedback on issues affecting the Center. The forum included an interactive survey and multiple breakout sessions with conversations focused on different themes



related to the Center's function. Participants were given an opportunity to participate in all four of the topic area discussions. A summary of these breakout sessions follows below.

Businesses and Property Uses



Overall, workshop attendees believe that the mix of uses in West Hartford Center is a key factor in making it a great place and this variety of uses should be maintained. Homogenous uses should be discouraged and local merchants and small retail should be promoted. There is a feeling that the Center has enough banks

and financial institutions and that actions should be taken to encourage other day-to-day personal service businesses like salons, day spas, tailors, etc. The robust blend of restaurants keeps the Center thriving, particularly during evening hours, but many expressed the desire for more family friendly restaurants that would be open for lunch service as well as more specialty food markets. The location of community services like the Town Hall, Post Office and Library right in the Center is viewed as an asset, but the desire for more community civic space and active uses such as a teen center was expressed. Additionally, as a destination, West Hartford Center offers retail and restaurants, but lacks other draws for visitors. Key points from this discussion are listed below:

Strengths

- Variety and number of restaurants
- Edges of residential neighborhoods are connected to the Center
- The Center is both a local and a regional shopping and dining destination

Issues

- Too many banks
- Parking is challenging for businesses, especially employee parking
- Restaurant transition into late night "bar" scene and associated spillover effects
- High rents contribute to vacant store fronts

Ideas

- More active uses in front of the Town Center building
- More community events such as movie nights should be promoted

Architecture

The buildings in West Hartford Center are oriented to the street, with uniformed setback and similar building heights. These common characteristics, as well as the eclectic mix of architectural styles, colors, and materials were viewed as strengths during the workshop. This mix contributes to the character of the Center. The cohesiveness of the Center, as well as its connection to residential neighborhoods were

praised. Attendees also appreciated that the lower building heights allow a lot of natural light onto sidewalks and outdoor eating spaces. West Hartford Center has been able to successfully incorporate new construction into a traditional town center design and this blend of old and new was valued by workshop participants. Despite identifying many strengths, maintenance, poor aesthetics, and loss of certain historic buildings were a concern for some. Ideas for combating this included introducing more prescriptive design and maintenance standards. Key points from this discussion are listed below:

Strengths

- Diversity and character of architectural styles
- Orientation of buildings to sidewalks and streets
- Height and scale of buildings allows a lot of light

Issues

- Aging facades and maintenance issues
- Loss of historic structures
- Threat of the introduction of larger and taller buildings

Ideas

- Façade improvement standards and design guidelines
- New development needs to be sensitive to historic character
- More architectural variety: balconies, roof decks, green roofs



Parking and Mobility

The variety and composition of businesses and restaurants in the Center enables it to be a place where visitors can park once and make many trips. This characteristic was considered a strength by many attendees of the workshop. While a few attendees felt that there is enough parking in the Center, the majority wished for more parking and decreased fees. Parking costs were viewed as too high and there is a belief that excessive costs contribute to parking on residential side streets close to the Center, primarily by employees. The desire for better wayfinding and signage of parking and destination points was a common theme. Additionally, many attendees expressed the need for a safer bicycling environment, including bike lanes and bike racks. Better promotion of transit options was a common sentiment as well. Key points from this discussion are listed below:

Strengths

- Can park once and visit many shops and restaurants in one trip- “park and walk” town
- Parking kiosks are good

Issues

- View that there is not enough parking, especially for business employees
- Parking fees for the Center are expensive and causes encroachment onto residential neighborhood streets
- Safety concerns associated with the parking garage, especially at night

Ideas

- Better wayfinding and signage for the Center, including parking lot signage
- Increase mass transit awareness and promote/advertise it more
- Add more bike lanes and bike racks
- Consider implementing residential parking passes

Open Space and Pedestrian Realm

West Hartford's wide and continuous sidewalk network was identified as an important strength to the Center and something that contributes to making it feel very safe. The pedestrian connections to adjacent neighborhoods from the Center were also highlighted as an asset. The use of street trees, planters, and attractive landscaping was positively described throughout the workshop. Overall, there was a feeling that the Center could benefit from additional open space such as pocket parks, playgrounds, or lawn and gathering space. Additionally, the idea of promoting more pedestrian-only use of streets like LaSalle, for events was discussed repeatedly. Sidewalk maintenance and issues related to restaurant and bar night life were discussed (such as litter), but people generally enjoyed restaurants and outdoor seating. Crossing at intersections was also an issue, many people felt that cars did not stop, or that signalized pedestrian crossings were often too short to make it all the way across the street before the lights change.

Common Themes:

Strengths

- Wide and continuous sidewalk network
- Landscaping
- Human scale environment with a lot of natural light, makes it an inviting place to be

Issues

- Transition from restaurants to bar use causes maintenance/trash issues
- Can be very loud at night, especially for residential units above businesses
- Difficult pedestrian crossings

Ideas

- Have more events like OM Street where streets are closed and pedestrian foot traffic is encouraged



- Quincy Market style use of LaSalle, maybe for Farmers Market Day
- Consider ways to make the median on South Main street more accessible and usable

TOWN PLAN & ZONING COMMISSION PRESENTATION

A second public forum was conducted at Town Hall on 4/3/17. This meeting was a different format than the first forum and served as a dialogue between the Town Plan and Zoning Commission (TPZ) and members of the Working Group. The meeting focused on providing an overview of the planning process and efforts conducted to date and soliciting feedback from the TPZ on a “Draft Vision Statement & Guiding Principles.” Several members of the public that attended and were given the opportunity to speak, however, none did.

III. VISION STATEMENT & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As result of the public engagement process, the Working Group was able to compose a board based vision statement and series of specific guiding principles that address many of the identified strengths, issues, and ideas the community shared for West Hartford Center. The vision and guiding principles were supported by the TPZ and overwhelming supported by the broader public as documented through online feedback.

While the Working Group recognizes that this statement and set of principles falls far short of encompassing all of the specific concerns regarding the Center, it echoes some of the most central themes and elements that help to make Center the great place that it is today.

VISION STATEMENT

Ensure West Hartford Center remains a great place for residents, visitors, and business investment that fosters a strong sense of community. The Center is at the geographic heart of the Town and must remain a place that accommodates shopping, dining, leisure, work, housing and governmental services, in an architecturally, economically and socially diverse and pedestrian-friendly environment. To continue as an economic driver and attractive part of the community, the Center must continue to be well-maintained, comfortable, and safe for people of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds at all times of the day. The attractive look and feel of the Center and its integration into the surrounding neighborhoods is a unique strength and benefit to the Town.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Maintain and enhance the character of the Center and its pedestrian-friendly nature, historic elements and diverse range of architectural styles while preserving the existing open feeling and presence of natural light

- Encourage appropriate development and redevelopment of the Center to be consistent with its character and current commercial boundaries. Specific consideration should be paid to transitional "buffer" areas where commercial uses are adjacent residential, to ensure a contextually sensitive design and appropriate scale, height and setback that enhances and compliments the quality of the neighborhoods
- Manage traffic and parking to reduce impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods and enhance safety, mobility and convenience for businesses, residents and visitors
- Continue to embrace Complete Streets improvements within the Center and surrounding neighborhoods
- Encourage growth and retention of a diversity of businesses in the Center to continue to attract visitors from neighboring communities as well as from West Hartford
- Continue to ensure that the Center is safe and comfortable place that attracts and serves all age groups
- Encourage the development of additional functional open space in the Center
- Continue to embrace and utilize neighborhood outreach and engagement as part of all future town efforts to implement these guiding principles

IV. APPENDICES

Online Survey Results

Public Forum Presentation - Session One, Including Survey Results

Public Forum Presentation - Session Two, Including Survey Results

Online Feedback on Vision Statement and Guiding Principles.